John Stuart Mill: On Liberty
By. Joshua D. Glawson

The philosopher John Stuart Mill is one of the most profound philosophers of the Nineteenth Century who advocated for negative Liberty and the understanding of the individual, as opposed to positive Liberty and collectivism. 'Negative Liberty' is having self-control and personal responsibility, doing whatever one may wish, as long as it does not hurt, harm, cost, or force others to participate in one's actions, such as speaking freely. 'Positive Liberty' is holding others responsible for one's own Liberty, positively costing them, such as an example of universal healthcare. In this selection, we shall briefly cover his book *On Liberty*.

For Mill, free speech is most important for finding truth in the world. He specified that with exchanging in discourse, people can find truths, and because finding truths in the world is so important for human existence and flourishing, it is imperative to not limit or regulate free speech. Mill held that speaking freely is a natural right that is an inalienable right; so much so that he stated, "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind," (Mill, 10). In fact, John Stuart Mill also went on to suggest there is a certain "harm principle" which means that people can do harm to themselves, but never to others. Although, I will say that the word 'harm' can be a very subjective idea, so for this we will look at it through the lens of negative Liberty as a relation between persons.

Once people have established these rules of *negative* engagement under negative Liberty, as further specified by Mill's *Harm Principle*, as a normative perspective of rule utilitarianism, people are to freely discuss ideas and contentions in public places, and because each party is respective of the rights of others, truth may be found. By suppressing views and limiting free speech, ignorance and stagnation are founded, whereas truth is most likely not found. Again, I shall stay away from the subjective nature found in popular beliefs and the collectivism that can arise from such a scenario.

More specifically, John Stuart Mill stipulated four major points advocating for free speech. First, he states that the act of silencing speech is an assumption of infallibility, and humans are naturally fallible. Second, people can only believe, or *know* as defined by 'justified, true, belief, within the real world,' when our opinions are challenged; we only improve those *beliefs* through direct engagement with others under the freedom of opinion. Third, freedom of opinion is allowing people to be themselves as rational minds, and it is imperative for maintaining such a quality. Finally, he also specified that there is no value to be found in completely silencing people; only under open discourse and freedom of opinion, as expressed

through freedom of speech, can provide value, whereas silence encourages deception, no truth, ignorance, along with many other limiting behaviors and restricted thoughts.

Overall, I agree with Mill on the support of complete freedom of speech, as long as it is not threatening the lives of others, under the understanding of negative Liberty which respects the natural rights of others. I think the more recent attacks on free speech is sure to cause more problems than help anyone. For those that want to limit speech, they only need to remember they will be limiting their own speech and thoughts, as well as those they oppose, because powers do not remain in the hands of only those we support, as they tend to change hands throughout time.